

ROOTHER DISTRICT COUNCIL

BEXHILL



Town Centre Design Guide

BEXHILL TOWN CENTRE

An Architectural Legacy

Policies for Protection

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Bexhill Local Plan was adopted formally by the Council in 1985 to provide guidance for the control of development in the town. Specific policies were drawn up for the town centre which did not foresee dramatic changes in the way of wholesale redevelopment, rather they would take the form of small-scale schemes of refurbishment and infill.
- 1.2 From the adoption of such policies it follows that any new development which is proposed will be most acceptable where it can be sensitively integrated into the existing fabric of the town centre. This approach does not mean that new buildings should slavishly copy the old but designers would be expected to take their visual references from them.
- 1.3 The purpose of this document is to establish the visual quality of the existing buildings in the town centre, and what it is about them which deserves our appreciation and affection, and what features have combined to produce Bexhill's special quality, its "spirit of place".

2.0 EXISTING POLICIES

- 2.1 There are two specific policies designed at protecting the character of the town centre. The first is of a strategic nature and relates to high buildings. The second, in the Bexhill Local Plan, provides broad guidelines for new development and alterations.
- 2.2 The County Structure Plan has recognised the special difficulties which high buildings can have for many towns in the County. This is especially the case if a town possesses a small-scale historic townscape or one of considerable homogeneity. The relevant policy CAC17 is as follows:-

"All proposals for buildings (excluding telecommunication aerials) significantly higher than the predominant level of surrounding development will be critically examined to ensure that they will not have a materially detrimental effect on the visual quality or environment of the area. It should not be inferred from this policy that buildings lower or not significantly higher than the predominant level of surrounding development will necessarily be permitted, as applications may be unacceptable on other grounds, e.g. the general character of the area."

- 2.3 The height of buildings is seen as being only one of many factors to be considered at the design stage and its very definition poses problems. In this report a high building will be understood as one whose observed roof line defined by a parapet or eaves is significantly above those of adjoining buildings along a common frontage.

- 2.4 To avoid misunderstandings relating to this definition it should be noted that it is the "predominant" eaves line which is referred to, and not individual elements such as gabled dormer windows. In fact this type of feature will be encouraged to produce small interesting variations to the overall eaves level. The use of the roof space lit from an elaborately detailed gabled window forms an important component in the Bexhill street scene.
- 2.5 Following survey work carried out during the preparation of the Bexhill Local Plan a number of areas of Victorian and Edwardian Bexhill, but principally the Town Centre, were identified and the following policy P.28 applied to them:-
- P.28 New development proposals within the areas identified on the Proposals Map will be required to retain and enhance their period/architectural character."
- "The essence of the character referred to in P.28 is represented by slate and plain clay tile roof coverings and other pitched roof elements such as gables, gablets and dormer extensions. These elements provide a variety of eaves lines and can be visually linked to bay windows to provide a strong vertical rhythm. Walls are normally in red stock brickwork, although vertical clay tiling may be used for small surfaces. The vertical rhythm can be consolidated by the careful design and use of window and door openings which should be vertical in emphasis."
- 2.6 The following sections of this report examine these two aspects of townscape and describe in rather more detail their significance for the town centre.
- 3.0 THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTER OF THE AREA
- 3.1 The significance of Bexhill's town centre in architectural and planning terms can be best understood by a brief examination of its development history which will show the special nature of the area and why it is important that the existing character be maintained.
- 3.2 The 1873 edition of the Ordnance Survey shows open land south of the railway which had been opened in 1846, and it was not until the late 1880's that development had got under way in the area, with Lord De La Warr east of Sea Road and Mr. Webb (a South London contractor) to the west. The widening of Sackville Cattle Arch in 1892 accelerated the process and by the turn of the century much of the present town centre had been built. In fact from the evidence contained in the early Building/Public Health Control record cards held at the Town Hall, the rate of development was astonishing. It is estimated that the majority of the present urban area between Park Road and Sea Road was completed in the decade 1895 to 1905.
- 3.3 It is this completeness of form, taken at a time when building employed a richness of material and detail, which defines so clearly the spirit of Bexhill. Writing in the Sussex volume of "The Buildings of England" series, Pevsner comments:-
- "...The Sackville Hotel, now closed, is the prototype of the Bexhill style of the 1880's, in a manner indebted to Sir Ernest George (Sir Ernest George, RA, FRIBA, 1839-1922; Claridges Hotel, London 1894-7; Royal Exchange Buildings, Cornhill, London 1907-10); i.e. with Dutch gables or, in the case of the hotel, gables with white bargeboards....".

- 3.4 The unity of development which has been referred to is emphasised largely by the predominant use of a rich red stock brick combined with Yorkstone band courses. Roofs are mainly slate but clay tiles appear in parts of the secondary residential streets. It is unfortunate that this sympathetic tone picture of red, greys and stone white is being broken up by individual properties being completely colourwashed externally and roofed with a variety of coloured concrete tiles.
- 3.5 Most of the streets contain large vertically planned buildings built either as terraces in the commercial streets or semi-detached villas in the residential streets. However, the use of generous road widths starting with Devonshire Road, the premier thoroughfare, the widest, has produced a series of streets whose sense of enclosure is just right for their function. These measurements are set out in greater detail in Table No.1 and are discussed in paragraph 3.10 (and post).
- 3.6 It will be noted that from the start commercial frontages were designed and formed a large part of the developed scheme, as the photograph of Devonshire Road in 1900 reproduced below shows.



DEVONSHIRE ROAD 1900

DEVONSHIRE ROAD 1900

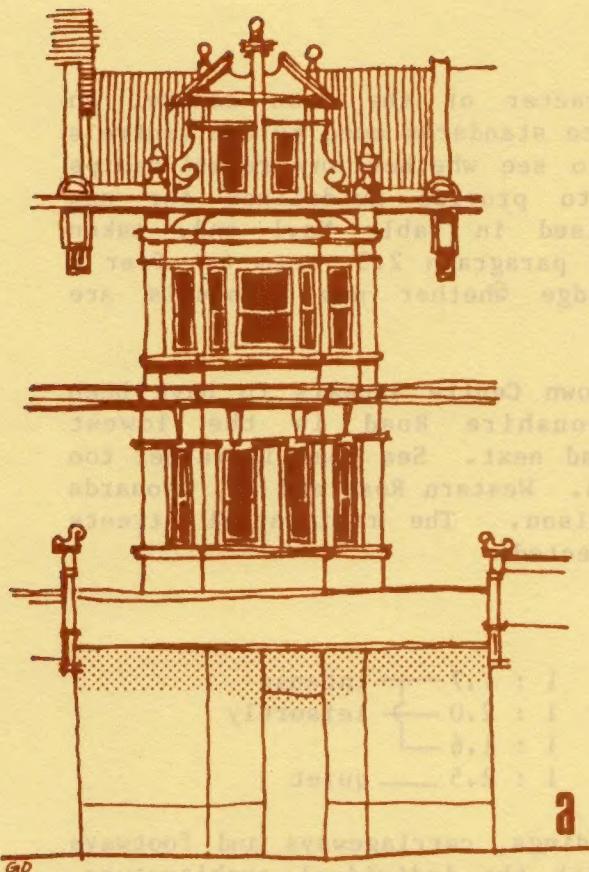
3.7 A large number of ground floors in commercial use still retain either an original shop front or, as is more common, the pilasters and ornamental brackets dividing each shop unit. It is important that new shop fronts are designed to respect this vertical sub-division and, where at all possible, shop fronts extending over two or three properties should reflect this and the nature of the elevation above fascia level. The shop front should be conceived as part of the whole and not ignore the rest of the property. The original commercial frontages were seen as providing a base or podium at ground-floor level above which successive floors could rise. This can be clearly seen in Sackville Road which retains many original shopfronts. This relationship should be retained and new fascia boards not allowed to extend into the first-floor elevation.

3.8 The photograph reproduced below, of Devonshire Road taken in 1891, shows that originally where a continuous fascia was used, pilasters and scrolled console brackets were introduced to relieve the strong horizontal line which would otherwise result.



DEVONSHIRE ROAD 1891

3.9 The following sketches (a, b and c) illustrate three different areas of the town centre taken completely at random, and summarise the points made in the preceding paragraphs. The unity of design (and colour when observed on site) is surprising and reinforces the argument made, that the town centre is Bexhill has a distinctive character which should be conserved.



SACKVILLE ROAD

This building, one of a terrace of some 14 similar units, represents 'The Bexhill style' and demonstrates the general vertical nature of their design.



ALBANY ROAD

A typical residential street behind the commercial fronts. A horizontal mass with dominant vertical features.



ST. LEONARDS ROAD

has all the elements typical of Bexhill:

- scrolled buttressed gables
- free use of stone band courses, quoin stones, window reveals and key stone, with red brick
- abundance of finials of all kinds
- cast iron balonnettes
- slate roofs richly modelled
- turreted engaged tower for corner plot

- 3.10 Having examined the architectural character of the town centre, an analysis has been carried out of the space standards used by the centre's original developers. The purpose was to see whether any relationships could be observed which would help to provide guidelines for new development. The results are summarised in Table No.1 and, taken together with the definition set out in paragraph 2.3, seem to offer a useful tool which can be used to judge whether new proposals are acceptable.
- 3.11 It can be seen that the form of the Town Centre appears to have been structured in spatial terms. Devonshire Road is the lowest height-to-width ratio, with Sackville Road next. Sea Road is rather too varied for a valid conclusion to be drawn. Western Road and St. Leonards Road are much less spacious by comparison. The residential streets exhibit the lowest ratio, as would be expected.

The figures are thus:

Sackville Road	1 : 1.7	intense
Devonshire Road	1 : 2.0	leisurely
Western Road/St. Leonards Road	1 : 1.6	
residential roads	1 : 2.5	quiet

- 3.12 It is the existing relationship of buildings, carriageways and footways which are so important and, together with the individual architecture, combine to produce the distinctive character of Bexhill. The presence of the two predominantly residential areas between Sackville Road and Sea Road bisected by Devonshire Road does much to support the impression of spaciousness felt in the centre, together with the frequent views southwards towards the seafront where the light itself conveys space.
- 3.13 The sea front presents special problems and, for the purposes of this report, has been excluded from the analysis of building heights. This is for two reasons: firstly, many of the original buildings have been re-developed, destroying the relationship which had existed between them and the streets behind; secondly, there is some limited scope to allow new development which produces a broken higher skyline in order to emphasise the junctions between De La Warr Parade and Marina and the principal roads to the north. Historic examples of this approach can be seen at the former Sackville Hotel.

PREDOMINANT HEIGHTS OF BUILDINGS IN STUDY AREA

1 taken from 1:500 enlargement of central area
2 estimated from deposited plans where exist & adjusted on site to reflect overall situation.

1 taken from 1:500 enlargement of central area

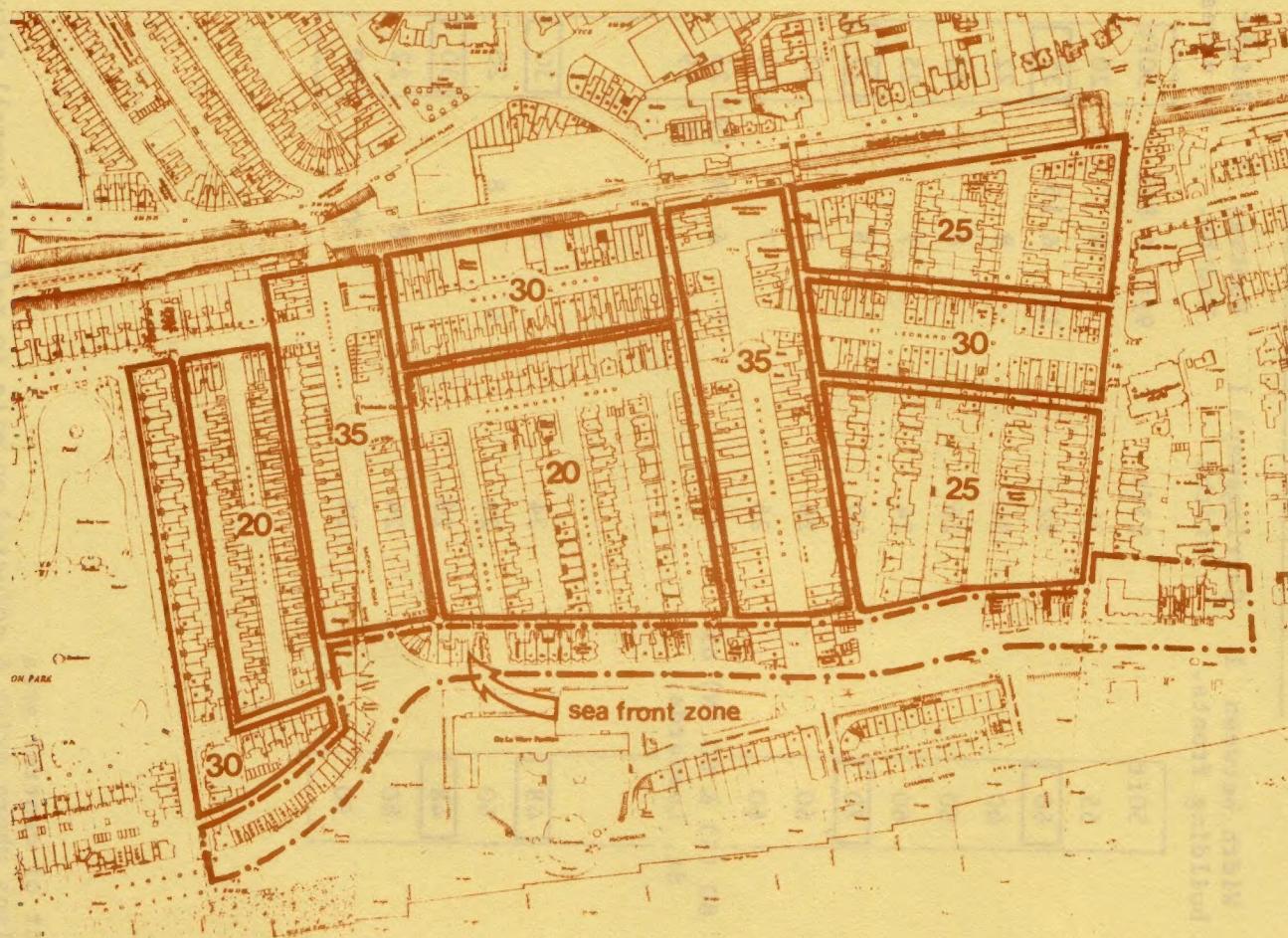
plans where exist & adjusted on site to reflect overall situation.

4.0 CONCLUSION AND POLICY

4.1 The report has drawn together two separate themes to provide guidelines for the control of development in the Town Centre: the consideration of street enclosure related to building heights and the design of the individual buildings and terraces. Taken together, both illustrate the existing character of the Victorian centre. The policies set out below provide a framework against which new proposals will be assessed. Attention is also drawn to the comments and sketches a, b and c contained in this report.

4.2 Height of Buildings:

The maximum eaves height which will be permitted is shown on a zone basis below. It should be noted that the figures shown may be varied by $\pm 5'0"$ to suit individual sites. The heights are in feet.



PLAN SHOWING HEIGHT ZONES

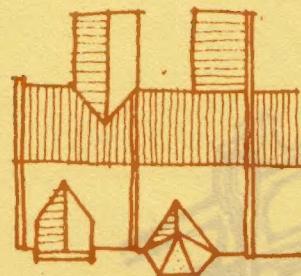
4.3 Design Characteristics:

The following design features set out below are drawn by observation of the buildings in the town centre and should be reflected in new proposals if undue erosion of character is to be prevented.

1. THE ROOFS

are considered when areas
are made up in plan of smaller
areas and features which combine....

normal
double pitch or monopitch

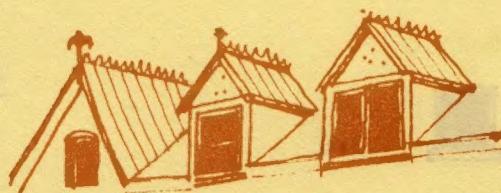


gabled
dormer or bay

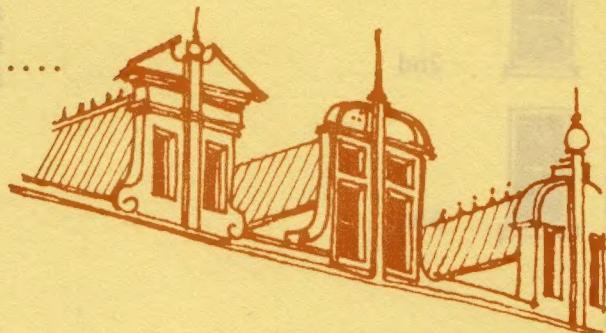
....to produce an uneven eaves
and broken skyline such as.....



or.....



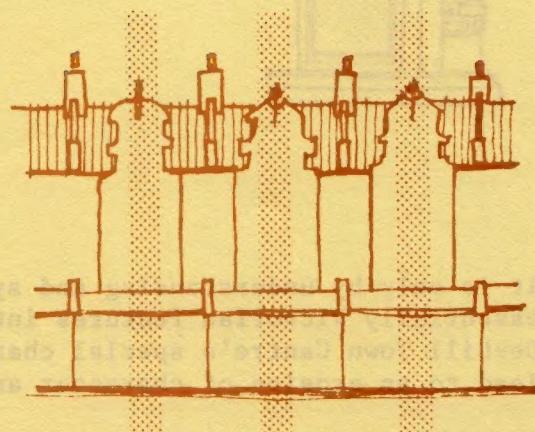
or.....

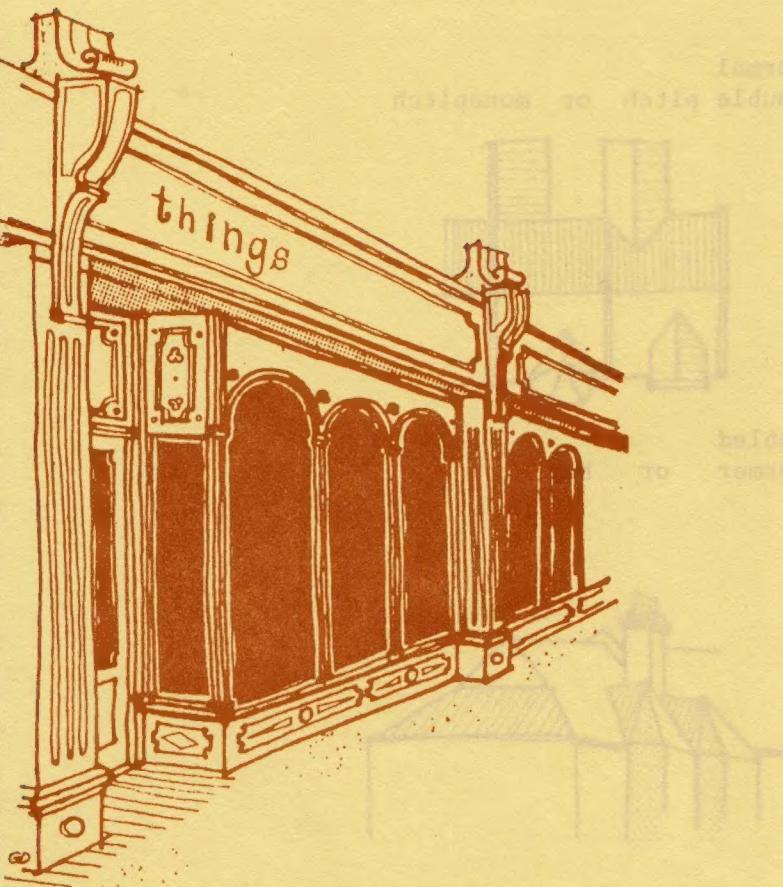


which relate in turn to the walls
and by extending the features such
as dormer gables downwards as bays
produce strong vertical rhythms.....

2. THE WALLS

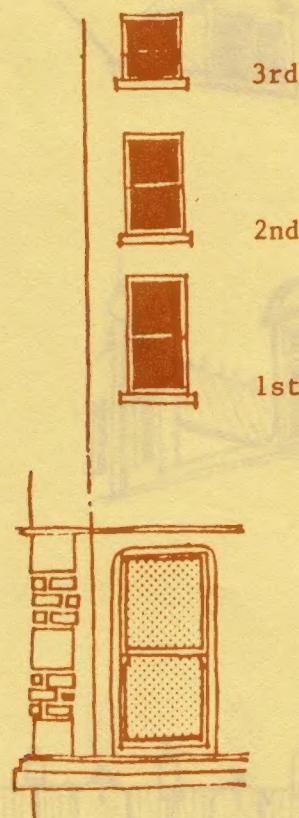
should be considered as a corrugated
edge forming the street.





Where new shopfronts are introduced they should respect the essential vertical rhythm of the street.

Applied pilasters, console brackets and subdivision of the shop window with mullions can help to relieve a long horizontal line.

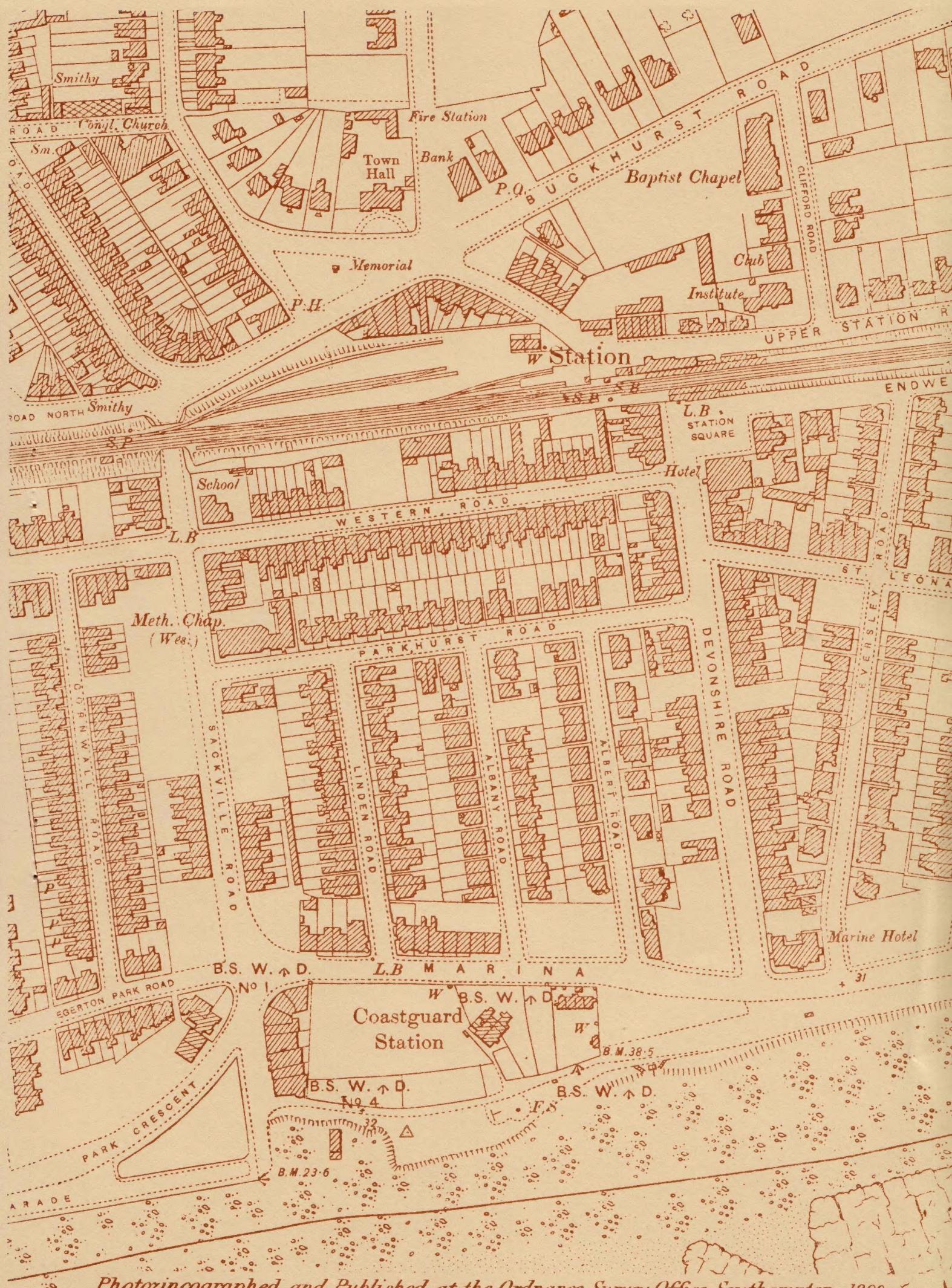


3. DETAILS

This verticality is enhanced by the subdivision of each building's sash windows. These in many cases also emphasise each floor level by becoming less rectangular above first floor.....

....and corners are strongly defined with York quoin stones alternating with brickwork.....

It is only by understanding and sympathetic translation of these and other essentially Victorian features into modern proposals which will protect Bexhill Town Centre's special character. To ignore them must inevitably lead to an erosion of character and identity of place.



Photocorographed and Published at the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton, 1899.

